THE VANISHING POLICE STATION
VIRTUAL POLICING IN THE FUTURE

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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Katrina Koslovski walks down her front steps to the street, ready to begin her workday, but finds her car has been broken into. "Nyet!" An unknown criminal smashed the passenger window, and her briefcase and car media system are missing. She returns to her living room, and tunes her television to Channel 911, the Virtual Police Station. On screen are a score of waiting avatar "officers", including a smiling, balding, Irish sergeant behind a desk. Katrina highlights each officer with her remote, until she finds the familiar Cyrillic writing she learned in her Moscow elementary school. One click puts her into conversation with Officer Ivan Bolshoi, a computer generated avatar, who speaks in her native Russian. He uses the television billing information to confirm her identification and location.

Powered by branching logic software commonly used in video games, Officer Bolshoi asks Katrina a series of quick questions. He learns Katrina did not see the suspect, and that her safety is not threatened. He establishes what time Katrina parked and locked her vehicle, and the items the crook stole. Using the point of purchase and marketing software that tracked her purchases initially, Bolshoi uploads stock photographs and individual serial numbers of each stolen item into an international pawn and property database. The system calculates both the replacement cost and present value of each item, and Bolshoi advises Katrina of the recent recovery rate, based on her zip code.

At Officer Bolshoi's direction, Katrina steps back outside and takes several digital photos of the damage, including a photo of her license plate. A quick upload from her smart phone adds the information to the Police database, and GPS confirms the precise location of the offense. The analytic police video surveillance system quickly searches available camera footage for that

zone and timeframe, and attaches the relevant footage to the growing digital case file. Officer Bolshoi texts Katrina's phone to confirm receipt of the images, and provides her with a report number. She also receives a list of firms who specialize in mobile glass replacement and fingerprinting, and are pre-approved by her insurance company for immediate service. She selects one within walking distance of her office and heads off to work.

A Catalyst for Change

Communities served by large law enforcement agencies have much to gain from replacing the physical police station with one that resides in the virtual world. Advances in communications technology, artificial intelligence, and social media make the virtual police station not only possible, but also preferable in many ways. While shifting away from the long held traditions of desk sergeants and precinct maps may prove challenging at first, financial necessity may prove a most effective catalyst for change. Parallel "self-service" shifts in e-commerce, banking, air travel, and smart phones, may assist law enforcement to move away from physical facilities.

When the "brick and mortar" police station disappears from city streets, citizens will tune into a different kind of police station to access services. Interactive television (Mermigas, 2010) will provide excellent opportunities for agencies to improve the speed and convenience of police service. Tuning into "Channel 911", for instance, would allow users to report everything from violent crimes to lost property from the comfort of their living rooms. Continued advances in artificial intelligence and branching logic scenarios will allow citizens to make non-emergency reports directly into the agency's database by answering a progressive series of simple questions. In case of an emergency, two-way video communication will link callers to a live dispatcher, who can forward information and real-time video to responding officers in the field.

Bridging the Gap

As the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic demographics continue to diversify in the United States, police agencies must continue to search for ways to bridge gaps between different people groups. By using artificial intelligence to create "avatar" officers who can interact in a lifelike manner with human beings, we can meet several different needs. Multiple avatars may be set up to speak several different languages, or to respect certain cultural or religious beliefs when asking questions. Agencies can customize the avatar officers' physical appearance to ensure they represent a cross section of a specific community or region. Age, sex, size, language, ethnicity, region of origin, and educational level can be programmed to create a truly unique "officer" with which any citizen may interact. Victims of sexual assault may find comfort in speaking with a female avatar, while parents wanting a firm lecture on civic responsibility for their children may chose an older, larger, and sterner figure to meet their needs. Interactive television avatars provide a user defined, custom made experience for anyone who wishes to improve their virtual contact with the police.

Today, on-line services and telephonic reporting are already replacing counter service, and innovative agencies are finding fresh ways to provide self-service options for their constituencies. Following trends in the hotel, travel, and banking industries, governments are using kiosks ("Virtual police station on line", 2005), web pages (Padanna, 2009), and "smart phone" mobile applications (Kozlowski, 2010) to allow today's busy, tech-savvy customers to fetch their own police reports, crime statistics, and investigative updates. Automated computer assisted dispatch (CAD) systems dump sanitized data about police calls for service and reported crimes into private databases, where it is scrubbed and formatted in easily digestible graphs and maps for public consumption (C. Nerdahl, personal communication, July, 2007). Law

enforcement has already taken the first steps toward eliminating the need for residents to come to the station.

New working environment for officers

Tradition and legacy may be hard to let go; police stations inspire feelings of confidence and safety within the community. In London, where stations were closing on a monthly basis in 2009, residents and officers both expressed concern about officers losing touch with the neighborhoods they serve (Whitehead, 2009). Londoners were concerned about their officers disappearing into large, centralized, anonymous barracks. Instead of relocating officers out of the community, imagine a future where the police had nowhere to go but into the community; specifically, the neighborhood of Katrina Koslovski's auto burglary...

Three blocks away from Koslovski's home, Officer Gina Cottrell begins her workday by logging into her department's Crime Control Center from the comfort of her kitchen. While packing her lunch and finishing her second cup of coffee, the young patrol officer learns of a series of vehicle burglaries that occurred overnight in her sector. Including the latest report from K. Koslovski, the four crimes were reported between 5:13 a.m. and 7:27 a.m. this morning. Available video footage shows a dark colored Chevy Volt at each of the crime scenes between 3:17 a.m. and 3:42 a.m., further narrowing the time frame. The crook covered the Volt's license plate, preventing the automated license plate readers from returning with registration information, but a distinctive blue and yellow bumper sticker provides Cottrell with a key identifier to search for today. If she stops a Volt with that sticker, she will be looking for any evidence of the thefts, including a monogrammed brown leather briefcase or an Alpine car stereo belonging to Koslovski.

Cottrell hurries out to her garage, where her state of the art patrol vehicle starts and unlocks at her approach. She is en route to a 9:00 a.m. coaching session with her patrol sergeant at the local library, and knows he will be aware of the vehicle burglary trend in her sector. She is excited to share the update on the Volt, and looks forward to any suggestions he might have for following up on the suspect vehicle. As she pulls into the parking lot, she asks the computer for any additional information on the suspect vehicle, and learns a fifth report was submitted less than ten minutes ago. Video was not available on this incident, but the time frame and modus operandi matches. The property taken included another Alpine car media system. "Sarge is not going to be happy about this," she frets, "and I've only got a bumper sticker to go on. Maybe he will have some ideas for me."

Officer Cottrell's work life is not too far away. The same technological advances that allow the public to see into our crime reports and call data also allow our officers to spend more time deployed in the field. CAD systems link with electronic report writing systems, fueled by powerful mobile laptop computers installed in patrol cars. Wi-Fi "hot spots" and cellular "air cards" seamlessly move data back and forth from the field to headquarters. High definition computer screens provide first quality photographic images of wanted suspects, and wireless devices transmit detailed scans of suspects' fingerprints to confirm identities in seconds (Dube, 2010). Today's officer is more likely to snap a digital photo at a crime scene on his i-Phone and e-mail it to his Department account, than to call out a civilian photographer armed with a 35mm film camera.

As technology advances to keep the officer deployed in the field, the patrol car will increasingly become the hub of police work. Officers will back them out of the driveway of their residence to start their shift, and will be responsible for care and maintenance using authorized

vendors. Large counties may use a variety of incentives to encourage deputies to live in and near the communities they serve, reducing response times and improving community relations. Tomorrow's officers will follow the lead of today's small business owners, and use "third space" (public areas such as coffee shops, libraries, and community centers) for meetings and appointments, instead of offices. Greater interaction and visibility in the community promises to build trust and improve contacts with citizens.

Some departments already realize significant cost savings in operations, maintenance, and vehicle replacement by using take home vehicle programs (Schmechel, n.d.). The Tacoma (WA) Police Department reported improved officer morale and an increased public perception of safety and efficiency (Mann & Goodman, n.d.). While officers expressed initial concerns about vehicle vandalism, off-duty inconvenience and personal expenses, these issues did not arise during the Tacoma pilot. A Florida Gulf Coast University study found similar benefits in their region, and reported that 75% of Florida law enforcement agencies had take home car programs (Repecki, 2010).

As a result of these advances, police stations are becoming lonely places. Once seen as a busy hub of safety and security for the surrounding neighborhood, in some cities they are now little more than parking lots with locker rooms. Sergeant Brian Rogers of the Fresno Police Department notes he is often alone in his district station for much of the shift, and admits he could spend even more time in the field by approving reports on his in-car computer, instead of his desktop machine. Often times, the only sounds in the station are the hum of fluorescent lights and large air conditioning units.

In the contemporary police facility, the story is much the same. Officers arrive for their shift, park their personal vehicles in the lot, and head in to begin another day, uniforms draped

over their shoulders. Once dressed, cops wheel equipment bags loaded with field gear into the hallway outside the briefing room. Briefing is short, with a review of a hot call from the night before and a reminder to check the e-folder for the latest policy or procedural change. In larger departments, a video message from the Chief may update officers on recent department achievements, or may simply highlight a tactical technique or lesson. Less than thirty minutes later, the new shift exits the building, loads their cars and heads out into the field. Crossing paths with their replacements, the prior shift drives into the parking lot and reverses the process, only faster; there is no end of shift briefing, and it is time to head home. Quiet fills the empty building, until the process repeats itself eight to ten hours later. The lights remain on, but in the middle of the shift, there is often no one home.

Officers' social activities no longer revolve around the precinct house. Health clubs have replaced department gyms, and the community no longer tolerates "choir practice" in the station parking lot. Family leave, flexible schedules, and declining overtime budgets make it less likely that officers will complete their shift at the same time. Busy schedules, chock full of children's sports, family vacations, and off-duty recreation, quickly pull officers away from the station upon the completion of their shift. Today's officer does not wait in the parking lot to talk with his partner; he checks in by text, Facebook or Twitter as he leaves the station in his rear view mirror.

Intentional and deliberate supervision

Without a traditional police station, though, how will supervisors and managers ensure their troops are getting the job done? Supervision must be intentional and deliberate to ensure field deployed officers make effective use of their time. Returning to Officer Cottrell might show how this could be accomplished…

Officer Cottrell sits down with Sgt. Justin Hansen, a 22-year veteran of the department, with experience in both the Training Unit and Vehicle Crimes. He quickly reviews her performance over the past week, including her part in a full team response to a suicidal subject at a nearby residence. Hansen praises Cottrell's tactical approach to the call, but expresses concern about her choice of cover, as the subject had access to a rifle. Using his tablet computer, he downloads surveillance video of the scene, and points out several options to Cottrell. She quickly identifies the advantages and disadvantages of each, and agrees she could have made a better choice. Sgt. Hansen quickly places the video and Cottrell's comments in her digital training file; he will access it when completing her performance evaluation in June.

Talk quickly shifts to the vehicle burglary series, and Hansen voices his concern with the increasing number of thefts. Nonetheless, he is excited about the bumper sticker, and reminds Cottrell to search for the sticker on other vehicles, not just the Volt, as their registration information may provide a common link or clue to the suspect's identity. He reviews several possible locations for the sale and installation of vehicle video systems, and encourages her to access available computer databases to map those locations against known probationers or parolees. She returns to her car and begins a search of known offenders, as he drives off to meet with another officer.

As Sgt. Hansen demonstrated, when working "out of" a virtual police station, supervisors must adapt to managing a shift without a physical briefing. The logistics should be straightforward; beat assignments, training videos, and video conferencing can all be delivered via the in car computer. Interpersonal nuances may prove much more challenging. How will you know if an officer is ill, distracted or in a surly mood? Sergeants must intentionally seek out opportunities to assist on calls with specific officers, schedule one-on-one meetings, and create

informal opportunities for team members to "drop by" convenient "third-space" locations. Teams may hold tactical briefings near "hot spots", allowing entire shifts to saturate problem areas during a shift, and providing an opportunity for a more traditional "roll call". Evaluations may include specific incident reviews to support performance assessments in required categories.

Lacking locker rooms, water coolers, and copy machines, the virtual police station reduces the opportunity for casual, informal communication between officers and leaders in the agency. Agencies must intentionally find alternatives to ensure communication between all levels of the organization remains accessible and fluid, lest morale suffer (Stainbrook, 2004). Training exercises can intentionally incorporate bonding components into tactical and interpersonal scenarios, to ensure cooperation and harmony in the street. Field debriefings after specific incidents have also proven effective, in both building teams, and improving performance.

Policing from a virtual station mandates a shift in how work is assigned, supervised, and evaluated. Supervisors and managers comfortable with Management By Walking Around (MWBA) will need to become intentional in their travels; meandering through the station will no longer be an option. Good patrol sergeants have always responded to patrol calls with their officers to provide support, evaluate performance, and learn more about their officers. While their full field deployment may make these visits easier, sergeants must make a disciplined effort to monitor all of their officers on a frequent basis. They can no longer depend on running into their officers before or after a shift. In-field briefings will allow a sergeant to see all of his deployed troops at the beginning of a shift, while GPS systems, interfaced with sophisticated CAD programs will help sergeants find their officers during the workday.

It's Not Just About the Future

In today's digital high-speed Wi-Fi work environment, supervisors can no longer be sure that a squad room full of cops intently staring at computer screens are actually getting any work done. Social media, computer games, Skype, and YouTube provide innumerable temptations and diversions from good police work. CompStat and Intelligence Led Policing have already begun to change the way we evaluate police work, and off-site supervision of detectives working from cars, coffee shops, and their condominiums will shift it even further. Supervisors will continue to use caseloads, follow ups, interviews, arrests and case clearances to evaluate performance, but may augment that with programs that report on computer usage, time spent in individual reports, and telephone usage. Supervisors must hold detectives working in an independent environment to clearly communicated, specific and measurable objectives, and be ready to intervene if their employees fall short.

Conclusion

Police stations as we know them may become as obsolete as the beaver-tail sap and the call box. New technologies promise to reduce the need of both residents and officers to go to a physical location to complete their business. Rising costs, crumbling buildings, dwindling capital budgets, and reduced bonding capacities may provide the financial incentives necessary for progressive agencies to consider giving up their police stations. To effect such a drastic change, law enforcement leaders must let go of tradition, envision novel approaches to conducting business, build community support, and begin the process with small, but purposeful, steps. Law enforcement leaders must shepherd residents and police personnel through a series of positive improvements that result in improved service, better working conditions, and greater involvement by police in the community, while lessening their dependence on a physical station.

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